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Marie Corelli and the Value of Literary Self-Consciousness:

The Sorrows of Satan, Popular Fiction, and the *Fin-de-Siècle* Canon

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Abstract: Marie Corelli's *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) presents a paradoxical test case for the practice of academic literary criticism. The best-selling work of fiction of the nineteenth century, the book was demeaned by Victorian critics and has been long ignored by criticism since. In spite of Corelli's recent mini-revival, the formally self-conscious properties of this work deserve further examination: the text insistently foregrounds the act of literary criticism and demands that the reader's attention is focussed on not only the content of the narrative but also the nature of the procedure of reading. Such a strategy allows Corelli's romance to participate safely in the kinds of literary transgressions enacted in the work of her since-canonized contemporaries such as Thomas Hardy and Oscar Wilde. The narrative mode warns against the production of the wrong kinds of readings of the narrative, inoculating its consumer against the corruption suffered by many of *Sorrows*'s characters – and by the readers of the kinds of contemporary fiction Corelli seeks to warn against. As a consequence, *The*

Sorrows of Satan, while exiled from the canon, shows itself to be surprisingly representative of the image of *fin-de-siècle* literary culture constructed by its afterlife. Like so many 1890s fictions, it is a work of art about the work of art, and dramatizes such by now familiar late-Victorian tropes as: decadence, moral relativism, debates over literary taste, realism, post-Ibsen drama, the sexual double standard, the marriage market, the New Woman, motherhood, hysteria and female pathologies, degeneration anxiety, mesmerism. *The Sorrows of Satan's* status as forgotten best-seller, a 'great bad book', asks difficult questions about the relationship between literary criticism and literary pleasure.

Keywords: Marie Corelli, Sorrows of Satan, pleasure, canon, criticism.

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1: Marie Corelli and the Victorian Canon

For all of the evident flaws, strange idiosyncrasies, and undoubted peculiarities of her writing, Marie Corelli was the most widely read author of fiction in Britain at the close of the

nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. As a consequence, however, of the way in which, after the 1870-71 Education Acts, critics have usually constructed the notion of ‘literariness’, they Corelli’s work is generally dismissed as too conservative to have engaged with the radical tropes that characterize the late-Victorian fictions have over the years been awarded an increasing degree of critical attention and literary value.¹ The enormous popularity of late Victorian best-selling writers such as Marie Corelli and Hall Caine can be explained, even explained away, by the supposed quiescence of their writing to the status quo, their success the consequence of giving readers what they want. Conversely, the struggles of such contemporaries as Robert Louis Stevenson, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, and George Gissing to put their best work in front of an audience provides proof in literary history of merit in their literary works.

More recently, however, scholars have considered Corelli’s fiction less as a sop to the pre-existing standards of an undemanding audience, but as a very knowing and self-conscious response to the contingencies of late-Victorian literary taste.² The ‘General Preface’ to Oxford

¹ For Corelli’s own meditations on this, see ‘A Vital Point of Education’, *Free Opinions Freely Expressed on Certain Phases of Modern Social Life and Conduct* (London: Constable, 1905), pp. 1-13. See also ‘The “Strong” Book of the Ishbosheth”, pp. 245-61 (p. 249). For a discussion of the late-Victorian literary field that is especially useful in this context, see Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

² See Teresa Ransom, *The Mysterious Miss Marie Corelli: Queen of Victorian Bestsellers* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), Annette R. Federico, *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), Julia Kuehn, *Glorious Vulgarly: Marie Corelli’s Feminine Sublime in a Popular Context* (Berlin: Logos, 2004), and Carol Davison, ‘Marie Corelli: A Critical Reappraisal,’ *Women’s Writing* 13.2

University Press's 'Popular Classics' series, for example, suggests that 'popular' works 'have often articulated the collective aspirations and anxieties of their time more directly than so-called serious literature'.³ *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), the nineteenth century's best-selling work of fiction (which was reprinted in the Oxford series), successfully manages to articulate such 'aspirations and anxieties', not through the exclusion what are now thought of as the dominant themes of the literature of the eighteen-nineties, but by letting them populate the narrative. The book self-consciously deploys, inhabits, and pastiches familiar *fin-de-siècle* topics—such as literary decadence, moral relativism, literary taste, realism, post-Ibsen drama, the sexual double standard, the marriage market, the New Woman, motherhood, hysteria and female pathologies, degeneration anxiety, mesmerism, and, as the protagonist Geoffrey Tempest has it, 'Blavatskyism, Besantism and hypnotism'—but then contains them in a sternly moral, anti-decadent and Christian framework that seeks ultimately to limit the energies of these new incarnations of modernity.⁴ Corelli writes about many of the same issues as her now-canonized contemporaries, but from a strikingly antithetical position: she touches on debates about literary censorship, but shows how easily the impressionable might be morally corrupted by the wrong kind of reading; she charts the effects of mass literacy by

(2006), 181-329; see also Carol Poster, 'Oxidization is a Feminist Issue: Acidity, Canonicity, and Popular Victorian Female Authors, *College English* 58 (1996), 287-306. A version of this paper was given at the ARPF conference 'Suitable for the Boudoir and the Circulating Library: Marie Corelli and Popular Women Novelists 1880-1910' at the Shakespeare Institute, Stratford upon Avon.

³ Peter J. Keating, 'General Preface' to *The Sorrows of Satan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. i.

⁴ *The Sorrows of Satan; or, The Strange Experience of One Geoffrey Tempest, Millionaire* (London: Methuen, 1895), p. 49. Further references are given in parentheses within the text. See also Federico, *Idol*, pp. 8-9, 78.

championing the tastes of the public over judgements made by critics; and she raises questions about religious doubt in order to assert the existence of the divine. Corelli therefore is certainly representative of 1890s literary culture in her choice of subject matter, but she is unique in the way that she apprehends these topics while at the same time warning her reader of the dangers of gaining further knowledge of them.

To engage these days with the work of Marie Corelli is thus to wrestle with a paradox. Corelli's success in the literary market in her lifetime and failure in literary history since makes her, as Annette Federico puts it, both 'a model case for theories of the popular' and 'a case to crack, a riddle, a puzzle'.⁵ The name of the most famous Victorian woman after the Queen herself is now a byword for obscurity. Writers such as Oscar Wilde both applauded and mocked Corelli;⁶ critics attacked her for her conservatism but circulating libraries also banned her works for being controversial;⁷ and some demeaned her low-class appeal while

⁵ Federico, *Idol*, p. 170. The approach of this paper is closest, of other critics in 'Corelli studies', to that of Federico, but seeks to develop further an analysis of Corelli's representation of the dynamics of reading within the context of *fin-de-siècle* literary production.

⁶ R. B. Kershner, 'Modernism's Mirror: The Sorrows of Miss Marie Corelli', in *Transforming Genres: New Approaches to British Fiction of the 1890s*, ed. by Nikki Lee Manos and Meri-Jane Rochelson (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994), pp. 67- 86 (p. 80); also Brian Masters, *Now Barabbas Was a Rotter: The Extraordinary Life of Marie Corelli* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978), pp. 12, 60, 74.

⁷ Mary Hammond, *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England, 1880-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 48.

others, including Gladstone and the Queen, recognized her as their favourite author.⁸

Criticisms of her eminently popular writing pointed to its apparent hypocrisy. Corelli was an anti-decadent writer, but the *Westminster Review* judged that her writing achieved the effects it did by focussing ‘on degenerate subjects.’⁹ The *New York Times* complained that Corelli ‘takes many commonplace things, used-up topics and subjects, and shrieks over them’.¹⁰

Arnold Bennett, tongue firmly in cheek, praised Corelli for ‘the fact that her inventive faculty has always ranged easily and unafraid amid the larger things’, and compared her to Thomas Carlyle.¹¹ By 1901, the last year of Victoria’s reign, Corelli was described as ‘at once the most popular and the most abused of novelists’.¹²

The case of a writer replete with paradox, one so critically demeaned in the nineteenth century and ignored in the twentieth, has attracted differing approaches in Corelli’s mini-revival in the academy since the turn of the present century. Inevitably, the dominant paradigm has been that of literary biography by way of cultural history: the mystery of the work is solved by uncovering the secrets of the ‘extraordinary’ (to use biographer Brian Masters’s epithet) life.¹³ Similarly, psychoanalytical approaches reduce the text to a figuring of

⁸ Masters, *Barrabas*, pp. 88-91; Philip R. Waller, *Writers, Readers, and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain 1870-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 800-01.

⁹ Stuart-Young, J.M. [Peril, pseud.], ‘A Note Upon Marie Corelli by Another Writer of Less Repute’, *Westminster Review*, 167 (1906), 680-92 (pp. 690-91).

¹⁰ Quoted in Kuehn, *Glorious Vulgarly*, p. 218.

¹¹ Arnold Bennett, *Fame and Fiction: An Enquiry into Certain Popularities* (London: Grant Richards, 1901), p. 83.

¹² ‘B.B.’, ‘Prefatory Note’ to Kent Carr, *Miss Marie Corelli* (London: Drane, 1901), p. 1.

¹³ See n. 6.

the theory by which it is read: the ‘answer’ to the riddle is the methodology itself. Such approaches, however, risk obscuring such distinctive formal qualities that Corelli’s work must possess in order to have achieved the success that it did: it is as if, with the troubling success of the bestseller explained, or rather explained away, literary criticism can return to its more traditional preoccupations.

An immensely popular work such as *The Sorrows of Satan* presents a critical challenge: it must possess some kind of formal property to have achieved the sales that it did.¹⁴ Even Q. D. Leavis acknowledged that great bad books such as Corelli’s must command some distinctive quality to earn their success:

But there is something else to the great names of popular fiction – Marie Corelli, [...], Hall Caine – than sympathetic characters, a stirring tale, and absence of the disquieting. Even the most critical reader who brings only an ironic appreciation to their work cannot avoid noticing a certain power, the secret of their success with the majority. Bad writing, false sentiment, sheer silliness, and a preposterous narrative are all carried along by the magnificent vitality of the author, as they are in *Jane Eyre*.¹⁵

Without question, Corelli was a popular author because her readers found her work pleasurable to read. Notoriously, the effect of reading that literary theory finds hardest to

¹⁴ For some critical reflections on this topic at the time of her death, see the anthology in William Stuart Scott’s memoir *Marie Corelli: The Story of a Friendship* (London: Hutchinson, 1955), pp. 19-34. See also the reviews usefully collected in Julia Kuehn’s edition of *The Sorrows of Satan* (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2007).

¹⁵ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1939), p. 62.

theorize is that of pleasure: the discipline has always struggled with the anxiety that, as Terry Eagleton wryly puts it, ‘since English was no more than idle gossip about literary taste it was difficult to know how to make it unpleasant enough to qualify it as a proper academic pursuit.’¹⁶ Criticism, it is argued here, needs to approach such bestsellers as Corelli’s, as well as canonical novels from this period, in relation to particular literary aesthetics of pleasure. Such an approach might in turn suggest that critical reading has something to learn about the ways in which it accords different types of value to canonical and uncanonical fiction.

2: Advocacy for the Devil

In a famous letter, John Keats defined the quality that goes ‘to form a man of achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’¹⁷ The writer-protagonist of *The Sorrows of Satan*, Geoffrey Tempest, when reading his own novel finds that ‘my pen, consciously or unconsciously, had written down things which my reasoning faculties entirely repudiated’ (p. 72). The discourse of *The Sorrows of Satan* itself regularly occupies positions that it ostensibly opposes, taking as much delight in an Iago as an Imogen – and then takes additional pleasure in good’s eventual overcoming of the forms of transgression that the text has previously

¹⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 29.

¹⁷ *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. by H. Buxton Forman, 2nd edn (London: Reeves and Turner, 1895), p. 57 (22 December 1817). Cellini admits an admiration for Keats in Corelli’s first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds* (London: Methuen, 1922), p. 49.

vicariously inhabited.¹⁸ For instance, this form of revenge-by-parody becomes especially emphatic when Corelli performs in the literary ‘drag’ of the masculine first-person voice, a technique also adopted by such ‘New Woman’ writers as Victoria Cross and Ada Levenson.¹⁹ As briefly discussed by Federico, when Corelli adopts the mask of masculinity, as in *The Sorrows of Satan*, *Wormwood: A Drama of Paris* (1890), and in her anonymously published *The Silver Domino* (1893), her unsuccessful attempt to challenge prevailing judgements on literary value by masking her authorship, Corelli’s formal strategy is to ventriloquize ironically the voices of the hegemonic patriarchal positions that she is actually seeking to contest.²⁰ Corelli was vigorously opposed to the equality of the sexes: her hyper-Ruskinian typing of sexual difference viewed men as inferior to women, who in turn bear the responsibility for using this moral superiority to influence men towards good.²¹ The voice of Geoffrey Tempest is a

¹⁸ George Bernard Shaw, reviewing the stage version in 1897, noted Corelli’s ‘prodigiously copious and fluent imagination’ – if also her ‘commonplace and carelessly cultivated mind’. ‘Satan Saved at Last’, *Plays and Players: Essays on the Theatre* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 161-69 (p. 163).

¹⁹ See, for instance, respectively the stories ‘Theodora: A Fragment’ and ‘Suggestion’, in *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1993), pp. 6-37 and pp. 38-46.

²⁰ Federico, *Idol*, pp. 82-83.

²¹ See Corelli, *Sorrows*, p. 209; and Corelli, *Free Opinions*, p. 184. For a more thorough discussion of the inconsistencies of Corelli’s sexual politics, see Janet Galligani Casey, ‘Marie Corelli and *Fin-de-Siècle* Feminism’, *English Literature in Transition*, 35 (1992), 163-78; on women’s nervous energies placing them closer to God, see Anne Stiles, *Popular Fiction and Brain Science in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 160-64, and on Corelli’s mesmeric contact with the divine, see Jill Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), pp. 85-98.

literary grotesque of late-Victorian masculinity, even containing a powerful homosocial charge in the relationship with his tempter Count Lucio Rimânez. Rimânez, is ‘the perfect impersonation of perfect manhood’ (p. 486), and functions within the narrative’s didactic mode of address as an ironic devilish advocate, sarcastically promoting the ideological positions that it aims to satirize.

No late-Victorian producer of fiction can have been unaware of his or her responsibility for the ‘influence’ novels had upon readers. Whether the reading of fiction was morally beneficial or not to its audience remained a widely contested topic in the decades following the Education Acts.²² 1895, the year of *Sorrows*’ publication, alone saw not only the scandalous publication of Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did*, but also Hardy publicly savaged for his representation of extra-marital sex in *Jude the Obscure*, and Oscar Wilde questioned in court on the meanings that could be read into *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-91). *The Sorrows of Satan* is a highly self-conscious exploration of the limits of what it is permissible to represent in fiction, of the power of the author in generating what kinds of meanings the reader might see in fiction, and of the duty of the reader to consume and to respond to fiction with responsibility and moral seriousness. The narrative plays with the boundaries of what is acceptable to Corelli’s enormous mass readership, granting its readers temporary licence to participate imaginatively in the kind of transgressions against moral decorum by such decadent writers such as Swinburne or Baudelaire (who are quoted and parodied here), while it strenuously moralizes against the harmful effects of literary

²² See Simon J. James, *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity and the End of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 1-8.

decadence.²³ In works such as *The Sorrows of Satan* and *Wormwood*, her readers can thus, to an extent, both enjoy the depths of, and then look down upon, decadence, from the higher moral ground to which the tone of Corelli's writing elevates them.²⁴

The pleasure, then, that the text generates, historically in the nineteenth century, and guiltily in the twenty-first, is twofold. First, as Roland Barthes suggests, the reader experiences the text as pleasurable with the recognition of its excess and paradox:

The pleasure of the text does not prefer one ideology to another. *However:* this impertinence does not proceed from liberalism but from perversion: the text, its reading, are split. What is overcome, split, is the *moral unity* that society demands of every human product. We read a text (of pleasure) the way a fly buzzes around a room: with sudden, deceptive turns, fervent and futile: ideology passes over the text and its reading like the blush over a face.²⁵

Secondly, and subsequently, readers are rewarded with the pleasure of the didactic in the consoling satisfaction of being told that they are in the right. Corelli's narrative method relies on a moral unity between the conservative ideology of the text and the response of the implied reader – but the dialogic and the sequential experience of reading allows the reader's

²³ See Kirsten MacLeod, 'Marie Corelli and *Fin-de siècle* Francophobia: The Absinthe Trail of French Art', *English Literature in Transition*, 43 (2000), 66-82.

²⁴ On the rise of this term in the 1890s, see Holbrook Jackson, 'The Decadence', in *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1939), pp. 54-70.

²⁵ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (London: Cape, 1976), p. 31.

response to be temporarily ‘perverted’ into enjoying that which the text seeks to stigmatize, while safely guided away from its dangers.

This capacity of reading pleasure to overcome boundaries, albeit temporarily, is especially associated with the Gothic mode, a genre which has historically allowed transgressive fantasies provisional licence before their containment by the text’s ending. Judith Halberstam has argued that ‘Gothic infiltrates the Victorian novel as a symptomatic moment in which boundaries between good and evil, health and perversity, crime and punishment, truth and deception, inside and outside dissolve.’²⁶ The rhetoric of late Victorian Gothic is that of self-conscious overproduction; in its consumption by the reader, pleasurable but transgressive feelings can be safely indulged before these feelings are safely collected and expelled by the authority of narrative closure, by the monster’s return to its box. *The Sorrows of Satan* is thus Gothic both in the supernatural elements of its plot, and also in its conscious adoption of such a model of reading pleasure. Like other *fin-de-siècle* Gothic works, such as H. Rider Haggard’s *She* (1888), Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Arthur Machen’s ‘The Great God Pan’ (1894), Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895), and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), Corelli’s novel dramatizes and even revels for a time in the kinds of sinning that its ending ultimately (on the surface at least) will censor. (For Corelli, however, the terminal repudiation of sin is kept in sight throughout, as discussed below.) Tempest’s own publisher asks him for ‘a bit of sensational realism told in terse newspaper English’ (p. 6). Corelli herself similarly indulges in fictional discourse as oxymoron, producing a novel that warns against

²⁶ Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 2. On Corelli and excess, see Kuehn, *Glorious Vulgarity*, p. 244.

decadent indulgence but which is often written in decadent prose: ‘Being faint with hunger I was somewhat in a listless state bordering on stupor, – and the penetrating sweetness of the music appealing to the sensuous and aesthetic part of me, drowned for the moment mere animal craving’ (p. 9).²⁷ Several characters adopt characteristically languid, decadent poses: Tempest is ‘indolent, listless’ (p. 71) and complains of conversations about ‘the latest “fad” for killing time, ere it takes to killing them with sheer *ennui*’ (p. 3). His wife Sibyl, like Hardy’s Little Father Time in *Jude the Obscure*, prematurely ages; Rimânez claims:

But now there are no lads and lasses, – enervated old men and women in their teens walk the world wearily, speculating on the uses of life, – probing vice, and sneering down sentiment, and such innocent diversions as the Maypole no longer appeal to our jaded youth. (p. 262)

Throughout *The Sorrows of Satan*, Corelli is very fond of the chronotopic metaphor that presents the current world as ‘fallen’: the popularity of literary decadence is for her the uncontestable proof that society as a whole has indeed fallen into historical decadence.

3: Writing About Reading

Although Charles Baudelaire is one of the many writers that Corelli’s novel condemns, his most imitated decadent trope, the erotics of death and decay, figures conspicuously, such as in

²⁷ Scott notes Corelli’s public persona as ‘exhibitionism, whilst protesting modesty’ (p. 68); on Corelli as decadent in spite of herself, especially in *Wormwood*, see Federico, *Idol*, pp. 33, 58, 72-75.

the tableaux presented before Tempest's wedding.²⁸ The discovery, following her suicide, of Sibyl Tempest's still exquisite corpse is narrated in prose heavily laden with decadent touches: the nearness of life and death, death as itself erotically appealing, reference to bodily sensation that cannot be described in language, colour, light and darkness, snakes, mirrors, perfume, cloth and clothing, jewellery, and even the fashion press:

I saw on the floor the handkerchief odorous with the French perfume the dead woman had written of, – I picked it up and placed it near her where she sat, grinning hideously at her own mirrored ghastliness. The flash of the jewelled serpent round her waist caught my eyes anew as I did this, and I stared for a moment at its green glitter, dumbly fascinated, – then, moving stealthily with the cold sweat pouring down my back and every pulse in me rendered feeble by sheer horror, I turned to leave the room. As I reached the portière and lifted it, some instinct made me look back at the dread picture of the leading 'society' beauty sitting stark and livid - pale before her own stark and livid-pale image in the glass, – what a 'fashion-plate' she would make now, I thought, for a frivolous and hypocritical 'ladies' paper!

'You say you are not dead, Sibyl !' I muttered aloud – 'Not dead, but living! Then, if you are alive, where are you, Sibyl? where are you?'

The heavy silence seemed fraught with fearful meaning, – the light of the electric lamps on the corpse and on the shimmering silk garment wrapped round it appeared unearthly, – and the perfume in the room had a grave-like earthy smell. A panic seized

²⁸ Cf. Marie Corelli, *Wormwood: A Drama of Paris*, ed. by Kirsten MacLeod (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2004), p. 171.

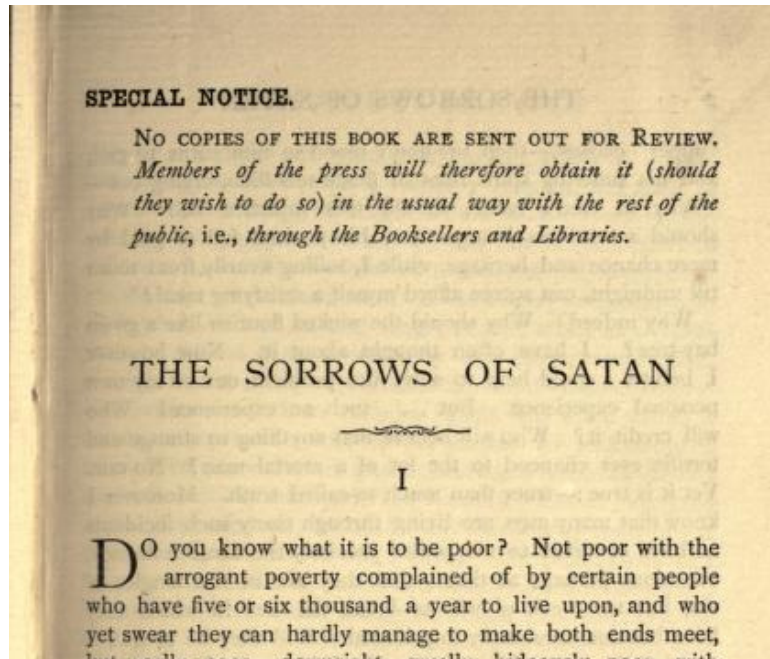
me, and dragging frantically at the portière till all its velvet folds were drawn thickly together, I made haste to shut out from my sight the horrible figure of the woman whose bodily fairness I had loved in the customary way of sensual men, – and left her without so much as a pardoning or pitying kiss of farewell on the cold brow. For, . . . after all I had Myself to think of, ... and She was dead! (pp. 424-425)

Sibyl's protracted suicide note, written as she expires – a grotesque embodiment of the death of the author – is one of the many instances of the narrative foregrounding itself as text; this is a key element of Corelli's inoculation of her work's readership against the dangers of its subject matter. As in many canonical *fin-de-siècle* novels, images of textuality – letters, telegrams, advertisements, as well as works of fiction – are prominent features; like that of *Jude the Obscure*, the plot of *The Sorrows of Satan* hinges on a suicide note.²⁹ Such literary self-consciousness functions as a kind of textual *Verfremdungseffekt*, which prevents too close an identification between reader and action, reminding the former that he or she is reading a novel, not experiencing life.³⁰ The invocation to experience the text at a certain critical distance appears even before the text proper, in its opening paratext. The first words of early editions of the text (omitted from Oxford University Press's 1998 reprint) read as follows:

²⁹ Ramon Saldivar, 'Jude the Obscure: Reading the Spirit of the Law,' *ELH*, 50 (1983), 607-25.

³⁰ *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), p.

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This reminder of Corelli's embattlement by the critical establishment enjoins readers, even before they have begun, to evaluate as they consume – to think about the construction of literary taste even as they exercise it. The foregrounding of the act of reading within the text itself is very characteristic of fiction in this period. This paratext therefore draws attention to the fact that like many other 1890s novels such as *Dorian Gray*, George Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894), George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891), and numerous works of fiction by Henry James or New Woman writers, *The Sorrows of Satan* is a self-conscious work of art about the

making of art.³¹ While the standard of Corelli's writing is in places undeniably poor, *The Sorrows of Satan* is also a highly self-aware, self-conscious literary construction that directly addresses the most controversial subjects of *fin-de-siècle* literary aesthetics. Its discourse is highly dialogical, incorporating long passages of interpolated rhetoric, polemic, and pastiches of Socratic dialogue and other literary modes. Characters discuss literary taste, censorship, and the commercial practices of Victorian publishing; the book depicts publisher and literary mogul Andrew Lang unflatteringly as David McWhing. Moreover, the narrative constantly reminds the reader that a literary work is not simply a mimesis of life, but a constructed artefact. This text obsessively draws attention to the conditions of its own production. It chooses a novelist as its central character and represents the network of advertising, agents, editors, critics and publishers' readers that attend a text's production, distribution and exchange. *The Sorrows of Satan* is further dialogized by (and makes claims to literary merit by association with) an extensive number of intertexts by different authors, mostly from the traditional canon, but also those against whom *Sorrows* claims to set itself in opposition: the Bible, Shakespeare (both misquoted), Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, Vergil, Marcus Aurelius, Dante, Milton (*Paradise Lost*, of course), Addison, Voltaire, Shelley, Keats, Byron, Schopenhauer, Carlyle, Huxley, Pater, Georges Sand, Swinburne, Rostand, Zola, Huysmans,

³¹ Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel, 1875-1914* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1989), p. 80; Winnie Chan, *The Economy of the Short Story in British Periodicals of the 1890s* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 82.

Baudelaire, Ibsen, and Nietzsche.³² Corelli even chooses to name Tempest's solicitor Bentham, thus allowing his colleague, after the lawyer has dispensed advice to the hero, to joke, 'Mr Bentham is a philosopher' (p. 47). Similarly, the Prince dryly informs the narrator: 'you, my dear Tempest, are not a Shakespeare' (p. 68). (For Rupert Brooke, *The Sorrows of Satan* was 'the richest work of humour in the English language'.)³³ Even Sibyl's suicide note is subject to a discussion about readership and audience, for, like Jacques Derrida's post card, it is 'neither private nor public' but indeterminately in between: 'It is meant for everybody's eyes apparently,—it is addressed to nobody in particular' (p. 430).³⁴

The question of 'address'—to both audience and readership—is key not only to the artworks ekphrastically represented within *The Sorrows of Satan*, but also to the literary culture in the real world that it seeks to engage. As mentioned before, one of the effects of the enormous enlargement of the reading public in the nineteenth century was a higher level of anxiety over the effects of reading on that public. The capacity for the meanings of a literary work to be dangerous was much greater if it could now be read by a mass audience rather than a small and enlightened coterie of readers. As a consequence, no issue dominated the

³² Maureen Duffy suggests that the success of authors such as Corelli in fact subsidized Methuen's publication of Ibsen, Henry James, and Emily Dickinson. *A Thousand Capricious Chances: A History of the Methuen List, 1889-1989* (London: Methuen, 1989), p. 10.

³³ Letter to Geoffrey Keynes, *The Letters of Rupert Brooke* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 61 (September 1906).

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Envois', in *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 3-256 (p. 185); 'The letter [...] is lost for the addressee at the very second when it is inscribed, its destination is immediately multiple, anonymous' (p. 79); see also pp. 51, 68, 144.

relationship between literature and society in the 1890s more than that of censorship and writing's beneficial or dangerous 'influence'. Both the wording of the 1857 Obscene Publications Act and the debates about censorship that followed it made explicit the risk of the wrong kinds of reading to the working class, to women, and to the young.³⁵ Like Dorian Gray, Aggie in Henry James's *The Awkward Age* (1888-89), and the mythical 'Young Person' of late-Victorian debates about censorship, Sibyl is contaminated by a book, a process that is the 'Seeds of Corruption' wedding tableau explicitly dramatizes.³⁶ Tempest feels revolted by Sibyl on their wedding night, but the narrative does not disclose the reason why. If the cause of his disgust is Sibyl showing evidence of sexual experience or even enjoyment, then this book seems to be implying that she lost her sexual innocence through the act of reading: this is a fantastic literalization of the fears of the National Vigilance Association about the somatic effects of reading on unsuspecting characters such as Sibyl.³⁷

The Sorrows of Satan seeks to immunize its readers, however, from corruption by the Gothic and decadent tropes in which it indulges by repeatedly, strenuously, and diegetically warning against their dangers. The novel's continual discussion of the harmful effect of some types of reading repeatedly invites its readers to read critically not passively, to evaluate

³⁵ M. J. D. Roberts, 'Morals, Art and the Law: The Passing of the Obscene Publications Act, 1857', *Victorian Studies*, 28.4 (1985), 609-29.

³⁶ See, for example, the three articles by Walter Besant, Eliza Lynn Linton, and Thomas Hardy entitled 'Candour in Fiction' published in the *New Review* in 1890, collected in *The Fin-de-Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 32-45.

³⁷ For a discussion of this topic, see Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel: Reading, Neural Science, and the Form of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

morally the words on the page in front of them; moreover, it attempts to pre-empt hostile commentary by incorporating its own process of self-reviewing. Sibyl warns Tempest:

“Now *you* have written a book, and therefore you must know something about the duties of authorship, – of the serious and even terrible responsibility writers incur when they send out to the world books full of pernicious and poisonous suggestion to contaminate the minds that have been hitherto clean and undiseased. [...] I am a contaminated creature, trained to perfection in the lax morals and prurient literature of my day.” (pp. 201-2)

Rimânez defends the dangerous music he creates by claiming that, “Art takes its colours from the mind [...]. If you discover evil suggestions in my music, the evil, I fear, must be in your own nature.” (p. 154). Such a position recalls Wilde’s defence of his own work in a letter to the *Scots Observer* which claimed that ‘each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray.’³⁸ To read transgressive meanings into the aporias of a work such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), or *The Sorrows of Satan* is to admit that one’s own mind was capable of imagining such transgression. The success of Corelli’s deployment of pleasurable Gothic transgression thus allows the possibility of sinning to be admitted temporarily, but safely. Tempest’s confessional tone and repeated self-censure allows the

³⁸ Letter to the *Scots Observer*, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Holt, 2000), p. 439 (12 July 1890).

fantasy to be abjected in a way that permits it to remain contained within the covers of the book rather than to persist as a guilty memory in the reader's mind.³⁹

4: Money, Magic and Metaphysics

The Sorrows of Satan thus enforces a rigid distinction between subject material and aesthetic form, by negating the harmful effects of the former with a powerfully counter-decadent frame. The arch self-consciousness of its narrative terms of address allow the novel to adopt contradictory, or as Barthes would have it, 'perverted' positions. R. B. Kershner judges Corelli to be 'an especially extreme embodiment of many of the ideological contradictions of the late Victorian period'.⁴⁰ For example, the narrative condemns the hold of commodity relations on social life, especially on artistic production. However, since it counted among the most conspicuous of all Victorian bestsellers, attaining sales of more than a hundred thousand copies a year, it was of course materially a product of those selfsame commodity relations.⁴¹ The identical marketing practices deplored within the novel, such as printing a very small first edition in order to boast misleadingly of the edition selling out quickly, were actually conducted to promote *Sorrows*.⁴² Tempest's publisher mistakenly claims to know public taste

³⁹ See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

⁴⁰ Kershner, 'Mirror', p. 70.

⁴¹ Masters, *Barrabas*, p. 6, Kershner, 'Mirror', p. 67.

⁴² See Corelli, *Sorrows*, p. 98; Corelli, *Free Opinions*, p. 259; N. N. Feltes, *Literary Capital and the Late Victorian Novel* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), pp. 123-24; Kuehn, *Glorious Vulgarity*, p. 12; and Waller, *Writers*, pp. 773-74.

better than his authors – in dealings with her own publisher Bentley, Corelli made the same claim for herself.⁴³ Unlike contemporaneous works by Stevenson or Gissing, Corelli's novel trusts public taste to identify literary value correctly; at the same time, however, *The Sorrows of Satan* warns that the same public must be protected from the effects of other literary writings that are less morally high-minded than her own.⁴⁴

The contentious subject of literary taste attains further symbolic weight in the narrative's collocation of the economics of literary consumption with literal consumption. In a brilliant article on what had previously been the bestselling of Victorian works of fiction, *Trilby*, Emily Jenkins has traced the analogies between bodily and textual consumption when both are translated through the consumer economics of late-Victorian mass culture.⁴⁵ In *The Sorrows of Satan*, money, moral value and the consumption of books, food and sex are all translated through an economy of the body. Since he is initially poor, the immediate aim of Tempest's literary labour is not artistic success, but simply (and unsuccessfully) a way of procuring the means to continue physically existing. The book's opening jolt into narratability – 'Do you know what it is to be poor?' (p. 1)—originates in lack: the hunger caused by Tempest's inability to convert the products of his literary labours into money and

⁴³ Masters, *Barrabas*, pp. 58-61. Cf. Marie Corelli, *Ardath* (London: Methuen, 1896), pp. 320-21.

⁴⁴ Corelli, *Sorrows*, p.212; Simon J. James, *Unsettled Accounts: Money and Narrative in the Novels of George Gissing* (Anthem, London, 2003), pp 94-95. See also Corelli's letter reprinted in *Wormwood*, pp. 374-75.

⁴⁵ Emily Jenkins, 'Trilby: Fads, Photographers, and "Over-Perfect Feet"', *Book History* 1 (1998), 221-67. See also Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

then food that will satisfy his bodily desires.⁴⁶ Predating a whole later generation of literary critics, Rimânez comments on the greater visibility of the body – to the neglect of the soul – in late-Victorian discourse:

‘Once upon a time it was considered the height of indelicacy and low breeding to mention “the liver” or any other portion of one’s internal machinery, – but we have done with all that now, and we find a peculiar satisfaction in discoursing of disease and unsavoury medical matters generally’. (p. 44)⁴⁷

Thus consumers who choose to gratify their debased appetites by consuming ‘gross material pleasures’ (p. 343) that are harmful to them, such as ‘poisonous’ books rather than healthier matter, do so because they lack the correct ‘taste’. The didacticism of Corelli’s fiction is thus itself a means of re-educating the jaded palate of the *fin de siècle*’s over-sated literary consumers.⁴⁸ For Corelli this unhealthy consumption is not only the consequence of economic change, but also metaphysical change: the rise of secularism in the nineteenth century has made consumers only too eager literally to sell, like Viscount Lynton, their souls;

⁴⁶ D A Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. ix.

⁴⁷ Cf. Corelli, *Sorrows*, p. 286, Scott, *Marie Corelli*, p. 109, Masters, *Barrabas*, p. 107 and Marie Corelli, *The Silver Domino*, 7th edn (London: Lamley, 1893), pp. 48-51.

⁴⁸ See, for instance, the repeated images of eating, taste, and poison in the National Vigilance Association’s Pamphlet *Pernicious Literature: Debate in the House of Commons, Trial and Conviction for Sale of Zola’s Novels, With Opinions in the Press* (1889), reprinted in *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, ed. by George J. Becker (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 350-82.

since they mistakenly believe that souls do not exist, atheists cannot see them as possessing value.

The 1890s' arch-prophet of social degeneration, Max Nordau, claimed that 'assimilating minds have hundreds of times felt tempted to modernize *Faust*. The undertaking is so sure of success that it is superfluous.'⁴⁹ In Corelli's late-Victorian version of the *Faust* myth, surely the key intertext for *The Sorrows of Satan*, money stands in for diabolic supernatural power – indeed Rimânez himself dubs money 'devil's magic' (p. 287). Tempest's money gives him the power to make the objects of his imagination material.⁵⁰ As a result, once he has become rich, Tempest no longer feels the need to write. As Rimânez has it, 'Genius thrives in a garret and dies in a palace' (p. 23). Corelli's contemporary Sigmund Freud suggests in 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming' (1907) that the reader gains pleasure from reading a narrative through the ego's cathexis with the hero's overcoming of obstacles.)⁵¹

⁴⁹ Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, ed. by George L. Mosse (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 193.

⁵⁰ 'That which I am unable to do as a *man*, and of which therefore all my individual essential powers are incapable, I am able to do by means of *money*. Money thus turns each of these powers into something which in itself it is not – turns it, that is, into its *contrary*. If I long for a particular dish or want to take the mail-coach because I am not strong enough to go by foot, money fetches me the dish and the mail-coach: that is, it converts my wishes from something in the realm of imagination, translates them from their meditated, imagined or desired existence into their *sensuous, actual* existence – from imagination to life, from imagined being into real being. In effecting this mediation, [money] is the *truly creative* power.' Karl Marx, 'The Power of Money', in *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 5th edn (Moscow: Progress, 1977), pp. 127-32 (p. 132). Cf. Corelli, *Free Opinions*, p. 111.

⁵¹ Freud also notes, usefully in this context, that his theory of vicarious wish-fulfilment is more true of 'not the writers most highly esteemed by the critics, but the less pretentious authors of novels, romances and short

After his unexpected legacy, the hero of *The Sorrows of Satan* becomes able to overcome adversity and fulfil his desires because of his sudden possession of money. As long as money gives him power, Tempest has no need to exercise his 'creative faculty' (p. 71) in the phantasying of writing stories: as his libido is fulfilled in reality, he no longer requires such compensation. Conversely, after his fortune has been lost and he returns to poverty, Tempest begins writing again.

In Freud's model of reading pleasure, the reader's own ego may be tempted to identify with Tempest's fulfilment of his bodily appetites: acquiring possessions, humiliating waiters, playing host to the Prince of Wales. However, the protagonist's moral unreliability when he is rich is strongly signalled, as in other confessional first-person novels such as Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860-61), by the device of a double narrator. Tempest's ethical judgement is revealed to be flawed by proleptic glimpses of repressed future knowledge, when the voice of the older and wiser reformed self breaks through. For instance, when a misogynist remark to Rimânez is narrated as having been given 'carelessly' (p. 40), or when Tempest is torn between admiration and jealousy when reading Mavis Clare for the first time, the narrative voice is suspended between those of the younger, erring, and the wiser, older Tempests. The narrative mode of address is thus itself a product of Tempest's morally repugnant, and hence formally unreliable, state. Tempest's money might, like Dorian Gray's portrait, allow the presentation

stories, who nevertheless have the widest and most eager circle of readers of both sexes.' Sigmund Freud, 'Creative Writers and Daydreaming,' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74), IX, 142-53 (p. 149). Rimânez rules that 'as soon as childhood is past, we are always pretending to be what we are not' (p. 34).

of a respectable face to the world, but Corelli's narrative technique privileges the reader into viewing his true moral condition. The author-hero's bad taste desires, in the Prince's ironic words, '[t]hings which have meaning and are valuable, have all to do with money and appetite' (p. 354); the more these desires are fulfilled, the more repellent Tempest appears. As in Corelli's *Wormwood*, the moral effect of the novel depends not only on the ending, since the main transgressor goes unpunished, but on the reader's recognition throughout of the narration as unreliable. The reader might indulge their vicarious fantasies in reading the novel, but for Corelli it is a part of the writer's educative responsibility towards the reader to make him or her reflect at the same time on the moral consequences of these fantasies. The pleasure derived here is the reverse of pleasurable suspense: the narrator's stupidity generates a dramatic irony which flatters the intelligence of the implied reader.⁵²

The reader receives the reward of such 'fore-pleasure', in Freud's terms, early because it is assumed that they share to a degree at least Corelli's religious beliefs. That the younger, erring Tempest fails to recognise the dramatic irony of his position is a consequence of the materialist world-view of the modern age which he inhabits, 'a world in which both Plato and Christ appear to have failed' (pp. 8-9). A more pious society would be more able to conceive of the existence of the devil, allowing individuals such as Tempest to avoid corruption: as Baudelaire himself had expressed it in *Paris Spleen* (1862), 'the devil's cleverest trick is to convince you that he does not exist.'⁵³ In Corelli's first work of fiction *A Romance of Two*

⁵² MacLeod, 'Francophobia', 72.

⁵³ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Generous Gambler', in *The Parisian Prowler: Le Spleen de Paris: Petits Poemes en Prose*, 2nd edn, trans. by Edward P. Kaplan (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997), pp. 73-75 (p. 74).

Worlds (1886), the heroine is healed of her ennui by being granted a glimpse of the Divine Revelation; in *The Mighty Atom* (1896), the central character kills himself in order to be able to see God. While the older, narrating Tempest acknowledges the true existence of God as early as the book's second page, his younger self, an avowed positivist, initially lacks the transcendent or metaphysical epistemology that would allow him to conceive of the supernatural and hence identify Rimânez correctly as the devil. 'We live,' Corelli declares in the Preface to *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 'in an age of universal inquiry; ergo of universal scepticism. [...] In spite of the marvels of learning and science that are hourly accomplished among us, the attitude of mankind is one of disbelief.'⁵⁴ When he is faced with incontrovertible evidence of the Devil's existence, Tempest alters his views accordingly: a terrifying vision of Hell ultimately allows him to cheat at Pascal's wager (the older Tempest having revealed the existence of God on the book's second page).

5: Conclusion: A Theory of Contemporary Realism

'No two human beings think alike; hence there may be conflicting opinions as to the reality or the non-reality of this present world' (p. 120), Rimânez claims, but the tone of *The Sorrows of Satan* gives strong guidance as to which opinions it believes to be morally permissible.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Corelli, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, p. 1.

⁵⁵ See Elaine Hartnell, 'Morals and Metaphysics: Marie Corelli, Religion and the Gothic', *Women's Writing*, 13 (2006), 284-303; Kirsten MacCleod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing and the Fin-de-Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 42-45; R. B. Kershner, Jr., 'Joyce and Popular Literature: The Case of Corelli', in *James Joyce and His Contemporaries*, ed. by Diana A. Ben-Mere and Maureen Murphy (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), pp. 51-58 (p. 58).

Corelli argues in *Free Opinions Freely Expressed* (1905) that realism as an art form fails to grasp reality because the perceptual world is itself less ‘real’ than the Ideal which lies behind it.⁵⁶ In Corelli’s *Ardath* (1889), Alwyn asks what realism even conceives of itself as being:

‘It is supposed to be the actuality of everyday existence, without any touch of romance or pathos to soften its frequently hideous Commonplace; but the fact is, the Commonplace is not the Real. The highest flights of imagination in the human being fail to grasp the Reality of the splendors everywhere surrounding him, – and, viewed rightly, Realism would become Romance and Romance Realism. We see a ragged woman in the streets picking up scraps for her daily food, . . . that is what we may call realistic, – but we are not looking at the ACTUAL woman, after all!

‘We cannot see her Inner Self, or form any certain comprehension of the possible romance or tragedy which that Inner Self HAS experienced, or IS experiencing. We see the outer Appearance of the woman, but what of that? ... The REALISM of the suffering creature’s hidden history lies beyond us, – so far beyond us that it is called ROMANCE, because it seems so impossible to fathom or understand.’⁵⁷

Like many canonical late-Victorian novels, *The Sorrows of Satan* is structured dialogically across competing subject-positions; but also like the more popular mass medium of romance, it aims didactically to guide the reader’s response to the preferred one: Coates and

⁵⁶ Corelli, *Free Opinions*, p. 165; Kuehn, *Glorious Vulgarly*, pp. 22-24.

⁵⁷ Corelli, *Ardath*, pp. 490-91. Cf. Corelli, *Free Opinions*, p. 278.

Bell, Corelli's authorized biographers, suggest that 'Marie Corelli never writes without a purpose.'⁵⁸ Literary history may have canonized the novel as the highest and most developed genre of Victorian fiction; during the Victorian period itself, the novel's victory was by no means certain, with voices as persuasive as those of Lang, Caine, and even Stevenson pressing the claims of the superiority of the romance. Photographic realism cannot claim to represent the real adequately if even photographs themselves can be as easily tampered with as Corelli's own publicity shots; nor can literary realism represent the ideal, which is depicted more effectively by the romance.⁵⁹ If the novel sought faithfully to portray 'life', it was confined to only showing, and not telling, and only to showing such life as the author was able to behold. The romance, on the other hand could additionally show what could and should be, thus edifying its reader through morally instructive diegesis.⁶⁰ Realism, for Corelli is thus self-evidently doomed, and her work urges its readers to reject the ideology of secular materialism – 'animalism and atheism' (p. 310), in Sibyl's words – that underlies it. *The Sorrows of Satan* is

⁵⁸ Thomas F. G. Coates and R. S. Warren Bell, *Marie Corelli: The Writer and the Woman* (London: Hutchinson, 1903; repr. Whitefish, MT: [b.d.]), p. 192. Corelli feigns disavowal of this method in the Preface to *A Romance of Two Worlds*: 'I personally advocate no new theory of either religion or philosophy nor do I hold myself answerable for the opinions expressed by any of my characters. My aim throughout is to let facts speak for themselves' (p. 4).

⁵⁹ Richard L. Kowalczyk, 'In Vanished Summertime: Marie Corelli and Popular Culture', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 7 (1974), 850-63; Federico, *Idol*, pp. 22-23, 44.

⁶⁰ See Corelli, *Sorrows*, p. 35.

a kind of theodicy, albeit one whose theology is somewhat heterodox.⁶¹ (Here, Corelli's version of the Devil does not even want to corrupt mankind, but mankind is so corrupt anyway that he has no choice but to do so; he will be saved and return to Heaven only once humanity has truly rejected him.)⁶² In her religiosity, Corelli again shows herself to be surprisingly representative of the *fin de siècle*. Kershner notes:

The mingling of eroticism and Christian spirituality may seem unpromising material for best-selling novels, but it should be noted that the same combination informs some of the work of Corelli's contemporaries the Decadents, notably Wilde, John Gray, and Lionel Johnson.⁶³

Corelli's suggested remedy for society's loss of spiritual values is as self-reflexive a strategy as Wilde's, and as self-confident as James's – an art that recommends its own beauty as a remedy, curing the soul by means of the aesthetic senses. Far from acknowledging itself to be writing of a lower kind, this work of fiction recommends itself as a spiritual remedy for the secular ills it represents.

The *Westminster Review* acclaimed Corelli as a 'genius of self-advertisement': *The Sorrows of Satan* contains a narcissistic self-portrait of the author herself as 'Mavis Clare', a

⁶¹ See Catholic apologist William Barry's 'Religious Novels: Marie Corelli and Hall Caine', *Quarterly Review* 188 (1898), 306-37; Waller, *Writers*, pp. 776-83, and George Bullock, *Marie Corelli: The Life and Death of a Best-Seller* (London: Constable, 1940), pp. 119-22. Carr writes of *A Romance of Two Worlds* as seeking Miltonically 'to justify the ways of God to men' (p. 33). Cf. Corelli, 'A Question of Faith' in *Free Opinions*, pp. 38-67.

⁶² Kuehn, *Glorious Vulgarly*, pp. 186, 230.

⁶³ Kershner, 'Mirror', p. 74.

critically derided but popular and beloved author of morally improving novels.⁶⁴ In spite of modern-day egotism being one of the ills that the book ostensibly attacks, Mavis is described in saintly, even Christ-like terms; the protagonist even intends to redeem himself by proposing marriage to an image of its author—a text’s self-affirmation of literary value if there ever was one. (For Coates and Bell, ‘Marie Corelli is bold; perhaps she is the boldest writer who ever lived’).⁶⁵ The journalist Coulson Kernahan claimed that ‘Miss Corelli believed in something very closely resembling the infallibility of Marie Corelli. To call her judgement into question was to tamper with eternal principles.’⁶⁶ As Kershner points out, Corelli shares with James, and with the subsequent generation of modernists a ‘conviction of the significance of their enterprise’.⁶⁷ W. T. Stead claimed in the *Review of Reviews* that, ‘*The Sorrows of Satan* will be sunk by the sorrows of Marie Corelli’ to a degree that would be fatal for the book’s posterity—but such utter certainty is also crucial to Corelli’s narrative method, and even Stead also acknowledges the accuracy of Corelli’s judgement of what her readers want to read.⁶⁸ The representation of the author’s own work within the work itself functions as self-promotion of the most confident kind: mankind will be reconciled to God by reading the books of

⁶⁴ Waller, *Writers*, p. 809; Coates and Bell, *Marie Corelli*, p. 175, deny the resemblance; see also Carr, *Miss Marie Corelli*, pp. 68-70; for Corelli’s own denial, see Arthur H. Lawrence, ‘Illustrated Interviews: “Miss Marie Corelli”’, *Strand* 16 (1898), 17-26 (p. 22).

⁶⁵ Coates and Bell, *Marie Corelli*, p. 21.

⁶⁶ Masters, *Barrabas*, p. 9.

⁶⁷ Kershner, ‘Mirror’, p. 81.

⁶⁸ W. T. Stead, ‘The Book of the Month: *The Sorrows of Satan* – and of Marie Corelli’, *Review of Reviews*, 12 (1895), 453.

Clare/Corelli.⁶⁹) Corelli claimed to write ‘from [her] own heart to the hearts of others, regardless of opinions and indifferent to results’ but her work is an artfully constructed negotiation between the ideological views she wishes to promulgate and her extraordinary awareness of what her enormous audience enjoys reading.⁷⁰ According to Mary Hammond, Corelli saw her role as ‘reinterpreting God’s word for through the form of the novel for a modern, increasingly secular audience which nonetheless had pure and healthy instincts.’⁷¹ While tailored to a mass market, Corelli’s work is anything but quiescent to what she sees as the ideological status quo. As Peter Keating has also argued:

The ‘magnificent vitality’ of the best-selling author’s personality rested on a moral confidence of such strength that it could make the dominant trends of modern ‘vivisection’ thought appear irrelevant to the normal processes of everyday life. In this sense the best-seller can be described (as it commonly is) as escapist, as long as that categorisation does not necessarily indicate a blindness or indifference to the forces making for change in turn-of-the-century Britain. Hall Caine, Robert Hichens and Marie Corelli were no less aware of what was taking place around them than Gissing

⁶⁹ See also Corelli’s vatic Preface to *The Life Everlasting: A Reality of Romance* (London: Methuen, 1911), pp. i-xiii and A. St John Adcock, ‘Marie Corelli: A Record and an Appreciation’, *Bookman*, 36 (1909), 59-78. Coates and Bell assert that ‘the woman who reads *The Sorrows of Satan* will desire to attain the angel ideal’ (p. 167; see also p. 57).

⁷⁰ ‘My First Book’, *Idler*, 4 (1893-94), 239; Cf. Marie Corelli, *My Wonderful Wife: A Study in Smoke* (London: White, 1889), pp. 47-49, 56-57, Waller, *Writers*, pp. 813-14.

⁷¹ Mary Hammond, *Reading*, p. 153.

or James, and the breakdown of societal and familial values portrayed in, say, *The Whirlpool* or *The Wings of the Dove* is not as far removed as is often supposed from that of *The Christian*, *Bella Donna*, or *The Sorrows of Satan*.⁷²

For Corelli, the present conditions of literary production threaten to lead readers astray, but if duly warned in this way against the harmful moral effects of reading pleasures, they are able to experience, indeed to consume, these pleasures, in her own work.

The questionable canonicity of a highly self-conscious novel such as *The Sorrows of Satan* certainly poses a challenge to the practice of literary criticism. For Northrop Frye, for example, ‘the study of mediocre works of art remains a random and peripheral form of critical experience.’⁷³ To write about such a work as this risks the production of criticism either as an exercise either in special pleading, or in scholarly narcissism, even kitsch: a self-congratulatory bestowing of scholarly resources on an object of insufficient worth to sustain or justify such an over-investment. That pleasure might nonetheless result from reading a Corelli novel is thus, to borrow Wendy Steiner’s term, a scandal, to criticism.⁷⁴ Yet the admittance of taking a guilty pleasure in such a work exposes an aporia in the practice of literary criticism itself – an inability of this practice to talk about its own feelings. Christopher Butler has expressed the difficulty:

⁷² Keating, *Haunted Study*, pp. 441-42.

⁷³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 17.

⁷⁴ Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure: Art in an Age of Fundamentalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

There are then many cases in which we are encouraged to enjoy being able to give a very general ‘theoretic’ interpretation, rather than to enjoy (and talk about) the internal articulation and rhetoric of the art object [. . .] It is all the same difficult for us to come to terms with the fact, significance seekers and communicators that we are, that the pay-off in many of our pleasurable experiences may be a non-interpretative, even a non-verbal one—kissing *without* telling.⁷⁵

The pleasurableness of *The Sorrows of Satan* asks embarrassing questions of literary criticism which are best met less with biographical exegesis, or with psychoanalytic or other kinds of allegory than the essential practice of criticism itself—with the examination of the ‘internal articulation and rhetoric of the art object’. *The Sorrows of Satan* is an especially rewarding object for such an examination, since it insistently foregrounds acts of reading as, intrinsically, acts of literary criticism.

⁷⁵ Christopher Butler, *Pleasure and the Arts: Enjoying Literature, Painting and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 208.